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THE CHURCH QUESTION IN MEXICO

By Bishop George A. Miller, Mexico City

No discussion of Mexico can ignore the story of the early missionaries who took so prominent a part in the destruction of the pre-conquest civilizations and the development of the Spanish colonial regime.

Wholesale denunciations of the part played by the clergy in the history of Mexico are unfair to the facts and the clergy. Many of these early missionaries were men of real consecration to the task of saving the pagans, as they understood the matter. Among them were men of outstanding faith and devotion and of tireless toil in their efforts to rescue their followers from the wrath to come. Such men as Pedro de Gante were not too numerous, but were a saving factor in the situation.

The good intentions of some of these early clerics did not save their methods from the barbarity and compromise that marked the period of the conquest. The main business was to baptize the heathen, as fast as possible. Often "the priests did notdesist until they were so exhausted by fatique that they could not lift their hands." In the course of a few years more than four millions of people were baptized. "Two priests bosted that their ordinary day's work was from ten to twenty thousand souls."

Since the new religion retained and tolerated most of the characteristics of the old, with merely a change of names, the natives made no resistance to baptism; and as nothing else was required, it was soon evident that the easiest way to escape the ruthless barbarity of the conquerors was to become a"convert."

All over Mexico stand beautiful stone churches in good condition, bearing mute witness to the energies of the Spanish priests, also to the enormous toll of toil exacted from the plodding Indian, with whom the wages paid for his work were no considerable item in his regard, - most of which was deferred for payment in the next world.

Popular education has never been one of the objectives of the Mexican church and during the pre-independence period the masses of Mexicans remained in illiteracy. The principles of moral opportunism everywhere prevailed. In the language of the one of the chief intellectual authors of Mexico today, "The chief ends of the Church have always been two: the accumulation of property and the securing of political control." At the time of Mexican independence in 1826, after 300 years of education dominated by the church, one half of one percent of the people could read and write.

Church Property

In the accumulation of property, the hierarchy was extremely successful, although claiming to be poor and all but destitute. Aside from the churches very richly furnished with enormous treasures for the glory of God, there were vast estates, valuable city properties, perquisites and prerogatives, and proceeds that baffle our protestant ideas of ecclesiastical holdings. The most conservative historians state that at the time of the disestablishment in 1857, the church owned, in one form or another, one-half of all the valuable property in Mexico. So powerful had the hierarchy become, that it seemed to the patriot Juarez that the only hope for the country lay in stripping the church of its properties.

The church was not only laying up enormous treasurers on earth, but it was blocking the wheels of progress and the country was at a standstill. There was never a movement forward that the priesthood did not oppose with the resources and skill of a powerful and conservative organization. The church vigorously

opposed the movement for national liberty led by the patriotic priests Hidalgo and Morelos, and gave every aid and comfort to Iturbide and Santa Ana and every other leader of revolt and opposition to the liberties of the people.

The Disestablishment

About the middle of the last century arose Benito Juarez, the Lincoln of Mexico, a full Indian who gave his life to the struggle for rights of the people. The Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits were expelled from the country and the Constitution of 1857, with the enforcing legislation of 1859, completely disestablished the church and "nationalized" the vast holdings of valuable property. The church has been left the undisturbed and tax-free possession and use of all church buildings, residences and secondary schools necessary to the carrying on of legitimate religious activities. There has never been official opposition to the exercise of the Roman Catholic or any other religion, as a religion. The issue is the political activities and constant meddling in national affairs on the part of a foreign ecclesiastical organization dominated largely by foreign-born priests.

The clergy has made frequent efforts to recover this lost control of the country, the most dramatic instance being the effort to overthrow popular government and establish under Maximilian a mediaeval Catholic empire in the new world. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century much property and prestige was recovered and when the ten years of political disturbance followed the fall of the Diaz dictatorship, the clergy were ready to use every opportunity to regain full control of the government.

The Constitution of 1917

So successful were these efforts on the part of foreign-born Roman priests to re-habilitate their cause, that when the constitutional convention met at Queretaro in 1917, the provisions of 1859 were not only re-affirmed but a new

section was added making it illegal for any one not a Mexican by birth to "exercise the ministry" in Mexico. It is obvious that the makers of this law were not thinking of Protestant activities, for the sufficient reason that Protestants had never in any way meddled in politics nor embarrased the government in its procedure. In general, Protestants complied with the spirit of this law from 1917 onward, as witnessed by the public statement of President Calles in February 1926. The Roman clergy was given nine years in which to re-adjust their activities and conform to the law. In February 1926, the archbishop of Mexico issued a statement to the effect that neither he nor any associated with him had any intention of obeying the law of the land, but would always faithfully follow the pope rather than the constitution of Mexico. This declaration precipitated a direct collision between the state and the church and month by month the controversy waxed hotter and hotter. The Mexican government refused to recognize and permit to function peaceably within its borders an organization whose basic principles included the open defiance of the constitution of the land and whose first and final allegiance is ever to a foreign ecclesiastical potentate who claims to supersede all civil government and rule above every human constitution.

The organization of a "League for Promotion of Religious Liberty" in Mexico, by the Catholic party has a curious sound when the record of an oppressive and intolerant Catholicism in in past is known and set beside the bitter war at present waged on every form of Protestantism in all countries where the Roman church is intrenched in Political power as the state church. The people of the United States are apt to be misled by our eminently open-minded attitude toward faiths that differ with our own and we are apt to suppose that the Roman arm in Latin American countries wields the same gloved hand that we know here in the United States. A brief sojourn in any of those lands begets a warm sympathy with Mexico in her struggle for self-government and political liberty.

Religious Forces in Mexico

There is little likelihood that Protestant work is to be interfered with in Mexico. The Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, is now almost wholly under Mexican leadership and these sons of the land are giving splendid account of their stewardship in the leadership of a loyal, sacrificing, zealous church striving nobly for the evangelization of the people. Through all the excitement and controversy of 1926, the Protestants stood steadily by the constitutional government and refused to lose their heads or in any way embarrass the government.

A high government official states that the actual number of Catholics in Mexico is about three millions, or about one-fifth of the total population. If we count all who have been baptized in infancy this estimate is low, but if we include only those who faithfully and regularly attend mass and confession the number is too large. There are certainly many earnest and devout people who seek in the elaborate ritual of the Roman Church spiritual light and comfort and who remain faithful to the end. No one is finding fault with the religion of the Roman Catholic Church; it is the tendency to "accumulate property and acquire political power" all controlled from Rome, that aroused the indignation and resentment of the government that disestablished the church.

For the faithful believers who do not think very deeply the conflict between the church and state of the year 1926 undoubtedly greatly increased the devotion and interest that had tended to grow cold. Much had been made of the "persecutions" of the situation and vigorous efforts were made to lead the world at large to believe that a veritable religious extermination was in progress in Mexico. However, it must be said in all fairness and kindness that the worst that has been done to the Catholics in Mexico was a very mild affair as compared with the ingenious intolerance practiced by the advocates of the "League of Freedom" against the followers of other faiths wherever the Catholic church has attained control of the political situation.

The Independent Mexican Catholic Church

Several attempts have been made to inauguarate an independent movement with the object of forming a church free from some of the abuses of Romanism and controlled exclusively by Mexican prelates. These beginnings have been short-lived. In 1925 an independent movement originated in Mexico City and other places and attracted considerable numbers of people. Some disturbances and rioting ensued but were soon quieted. The government conceded to the independents the use of a church which had been used as a warehouse for some time. The new movement proposed to abolish the use of dead languages in the service, the confession, the worship of saints, and the celibacy of the clergy, and advocated various reform measures. There are undoubtedly a number of people within the Catholic church who would follow a really spiritual and forward-moving reaction from Rome.

Religion and Morals

It is difficult for the foreigner, inexperienced in the ways of Latin lands, to understand the religious situation anywhere in Latin-America. Dr.Ernesto Nelson, one of the most distinguished scholars of South America, speaking at the Conference on Christian Work in South America, at Montevideo in 1925, said to the delegates from the United States, "You come from a land where religion has always been identified with morality. Here religion has rather been identified with immorality. In your land, the church stands for moral character; here we find it necessary to go for character mostly to those who are farthest removed from the church. While you in the north have been bringing social effort and science nearer to religion, we have purposely been trying to remove science farther and farther from religion." This fearless student of the social order does not consider himself a Christian, but speaks from the full heart of the multitudes who have suffered, not from religion, but from a self-centered, progress-blocking, religio-political hierarchy that has constituted one of the major problems of Latin-America for centuries past.